



The Definition of Knowledge ¹

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The scholars defined knowledge with numerous definitions and each definition was built upon a specific view. We do not wish to enumerate all of the definitions of knowledge here but to narrate some of them of what will benefit us at this point:

Knowledge (*al-`ilm*) is firm belief conforming to the reality.

The philosophers (*hukamā*) said: it is the presence of the image of a thing in the mind.

The first definition is more specific than the second one.

It is also said that knowledge is the perception of a thing in conformance with what it is.

And it is said, knowledge is too exalted to have a definition.

And it is said: knowledge is an attribute which perceives universals and particulars.

And it is said: knowledge is the self's arrival at the meaning of a thing.

And it is said: knowledge is a metaphor for the attributes of reason and sense perception.

And al-Mullā `Abdullāh said in his *sharh `alā tahdhīb al-mantiq* of Sa'd al-Taftazānī:

“*knowledge* is the image which appears in the mind (*`aql*) from a thing.”

¹ Translated from: *`ilm al-kalām wa-atbārahū al-munji fīl fikr al-islāmi*

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Al-Mayazad Muhammad `Ali added:

“and it was defined by some as ‘the self’s acceptance of that image’;
and by others as ‘the image which appears in the mind’”

and then he added,

“And so on the first is the argument of how, on the second the argument of
what happened, and on the third the argument of what is being explored.”

And the Ustādh Shaykh Muhammad al-Karamī said,

“I have not seen a definition of *knowledge* better and more truthful than what was said
by the ‘Allāma Shaykh `Abdul Hādī al-Shaliyya:

‘The reality of knowledge is: the uncovering of the reality of the
known thing in the mind of the knower.’

For indeed true knowledge is nothing but uncovering things as they are, for how many
times does the self perceive that a thing is true and real when in reality it is imagination
and lies.”

And so we should observe that most of these definitions return back in their root to three
definitions and they are:

Firstly, that knowledge means ‘that which is known’ or that which we are knowing.

Secondly, that knowledge is that which we know with, and this is the self and its attributes.

Third: that the faculty of knowledge be (properly) attributed to that firmly-established
quality (*malaka*) - which is obtained after rigorous acquisition of numerous points of
knowledge - for there is no doubt that there is an established quality which distinguishes the
one firmly rooted in knowledge from its novice seeker.

